

Postmarks & cancellations

Postmarks are marks on a letter with the date the letter was posted. The first postmark was long before the first stamp. In 1661, Henry Bishop introduced a mark to show the date the letter was received by the post. They are called 'Bishop marks' and only showed the month and the day.



Bishop mark 17th April

Some modern postmarks are very decorative, especially if they are to celebrate a special event.



[Extracted from the British Postal Society Special Event Postmarks of the United Kingdom Volumes 1- 5 1851-2013]

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- Cancellations





Cancellations

Postmarks are different from cancellations. Cancellations are marks to show that the stamp has been used. Sometimes the postmark can be used as the cancellation and sometimes the postmark and cancellation are one design.



The first stamp, the penny black, was introduced in 1840. There had to be a way of marking the stamp to stop people reusing it. The first cancellation was the red Maltese cross. The ink was red to show up against the penny black stamp.



red cancellation



black cancellation

It was later found out that the red ink could be washed off the stamp and people could then re-use that stamp!

The cancellation was changed to a black ink that couldn't be washed off but there was another problem – the black ink didn't show up on the black stamp.

Therefore the penny black was replaced with the penny red in 1841.

